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ABSTRACT

This study examines the degree of consistency between students' oral and written expression, with regard to the ideas and opinions communicated. Fifty-five freshman composition students were asked to elaborate on a subject of choice in a 500-word essay and in a private office interview with the teacher. Data revealed that consistency of expression was independent of such factors as college entrance examination scores, previous grades in English courses, high school grade-point average, and sex of subject. Factors related to consistency of expression, which separated students strong in English from students weak in English, were performance in basic English, performance on the essay used in this experiment, and semester course grade. Generally, the ideas expressed orally by students were more clear and convincing than were the same ideas expressed in their written essays. (KS)

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Linguistics and the Crisis in Writing

Carol Swanson

Linguistics has made available a vast number of new insights into the nature of language. These insights, in many cases, have been in direct contradiction to much of what has been taught in the English departments of public schools and colleges for decades. These linguistic advances I feel constitute a breakthrough that has made obsolete much of what English teachers have previously considered doctrine in the discipline.

The study of linguistics has made it increasingly difficult, for example, to propagate such myths as (1) the belief that language change leads to deterioration, (2) the notion that grammar is sacred, (3) the prejudice that dialects are perversions of the language, and (4) the popularly held impression that written language is somehow more important than oral language. The renewed appreciation and recognition of oral language is, in my opinion, the most significant revelation that linguistics has made to English study.

In 1969, the entire January issue of the English Journal (publication of the National Council of Teachers of English) was devoted to Robert Zoellner's theory of composition. This widely read article, which outlined the possibilities of linking oral language study and composition study, recognized that oral language is primary, that a teacher can work with a student's oral language in order to improve his ability to use the written

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language.

Actually the study of oral language is not so new. Rhetoric, the persuasive discourse study of the Greeks, combined oral and written language. From as far back as Corax of Syracuse, the man generally held as the formulator of the art of rhetoric, there has been implicit recognition of the interrelated nature of these two aspects of communication. This tradition was strongly maintained in education until the early twentieth century when college and university English departments shifted their emphasis from rhetoric to literature, philology and criticism. The term rhetoric largely fell out of style and was generally replaced by the term still in use today, composition. Composition dealt exclusively with written discourse: very soon all semblance of rhetorical theory pretty much disappeared to be replaced by the study of correct usage, punctuation, and spelling. The rhetoric book was gradually replaced by the grammar handbook. The final break between oral and written discourse occurred in 1913 when the study of oral English and rhetoric became the substance of the newly formed speech departments. Written English along with grammar and literature became the primary function of English study.

An Investigation of Content Differences in Oral Vs Written College Freshman Discourse

The research I did for the doctoral degree was conducted among freshman composition students at San Antonio Junior College during the spring semester, 1975. The data collection procedures, which consisted of a written discourse assignment followed by an oral discourse assignment, was conducted solely by the author with students from two freshman English classes. Fifty-five students were involved, twenty-nine males and twenty-six females.

My study of freshman English composition compared the ideas students expressed in written discourse with the ideas they expressed in oral interviews. The aim was to determine whether students were consistent in the views they held in the two situations.

The research was done in an effort to identify a possible reason why college freshmen have so much difficulty with writing in their English classes. The mechanics of style, diction, and punctuation were not the focus of the study. Instead the emphasis was on content quality, the ideas and opinions students attempted to express in their essays.

This content quality was examined with reference to what was termed consistency. The object was to determine whether or not students actually hold the opinions and feelings they express in their school-related writing, or if for some reason, they take what might be called a "persona" in their class essays, a

posed point of view which might have very little, if any basis in their true thoughts and feelings.

If this is true, if students ignore or hide their real thoughts and instead substitute thoughts they feel will please the teacher or what they think will be accepted, this could be part of the reason student writing in English class is so often dull and uninteresting, why it contains illogical reasoning and is generally unenjoyable to read.

The research was conducted to find out if, as Zoellner has proposed, students learn through many years of school-related writing experiences to dissociate their real feelings from their essay-expressed feelings. Zoellner thinks such dissociation is more or less conditioned by rigid and exacting writing experiences students have starting in the lower grades of public school. By the college years, the conditioning is so deep-rooted that students actually hold separate and totally different frames of mind with which they express themselves. Zoellner labels these the scribal modality and the vocal modality.

Seven hypotheses were formulated to examine this problem. These hypotheses were designed to determine what kinds of students were most likely to be inconsistent. The following is a listing of the seven factors considered.

(1) Consistency is independent of sex.

(2) Consistency is independent of college entrance examination scores as measured by the ACT.

(3) Consistency is independent of high school GPA.

(4) Consistency is independent of performance in Basic English.

(5) Consistency is independent of high school English performance as measured by English course grades recorded on the high school transcript.

(6) Consistency is independent of the semester performance in English as measured by the course grade.

(7) Consistency is independent of performance on the essay used in this experiment.

The study involved fifty-five students enrolled in freshman composition. Each student participated in two activities: (1) Written discourse which consisted of writing a 500 word essay in the expressive aim and (2) oral discourse, a private office interview with the teacher. In both situations, the student was asked to express his ideas, opinions and feelings on a subject of his choice. The interview followed the essay by two to four days. Questions brought up by the teacher in the interview came from the previously written essay. The object was to get the student to re-express the ideas he had already presented in his essay.

The data collected were analyzed using the chi-square test of significance. The statistical computations were made to determine if the differences between the observed and expected frequencies of consistency occurred from chance or

determine if the differences between the observed and expected frequencies of consistency occurred from chance or if these differences were caused by some outside factor. The .05 level of significance was used to test an hypothesis. Out of the seven hypotheses proposed in the study, two were rejected at the .05 level of confidence, one, however, was rejected at the .1 level of significance, and four hypotheses were accepted.

Two hypotheses were rejected at the .05 level of significance: (1) Consistency is independent of performance in Basic English and (2) Consistency is independent of performance on the essay used in this experiment. One hypothesis was rejected at the .1 level of significance: Consistency is independent of the semester performance in English as measured by the course grade. Four hypotheses were accepted: (1) Consistency is independent of sex, (2) Consistency is independent of college entrance examination scores, (3) Consistency is independent of high school grade point average, and (4) Consistency is independent of high school English grades recorded on the high school transcript.

The results of the study revealed that the factors which show relationships with consistency are traits that separate stronger English students from weaker English students. Those subjects in the experiment who had experienced previous success

with general English language skills were more likely to be consistent in the ideas they expressed than the students who had not had previous successful experiences in English study.

In general the subjects who participated in this experiment did not perform as well in the freshman English course as they did in their previous high school English courses. Fewer students made grades of A and B, and more students made grades of D and F.

High school English grades as recorded on transcripts do not, of course, compare very readily with a freshman composition course. Unlike the college course, high school grades usually represent some combination study of grammar, literature, and composition. Additionally the academic requirements and grading scales as well as many other school characteristics such as: quality of faculty, socio-economic background of student body, and curriculum offerings of the school, are impossible to objectively compare. The subjects in this study came from a number of different high schools, not only in San Antonio and Texas, but also from several other states.

With reference to the hypotheses accepted, the two factors, sex and college entrance examination scores, certainly yielded more precise points of comparison with consistency than did high school GPA and high school English grades. When weighing the final results of the statistical analysis of the data these

facts should be considered carefully.

This factor of preciseness is also true with relation to the three hypotheses rejected, consistency as it relates to whether or not a student took Basic English, performance on the essay used in the experiment, and composition course grade.

These factors could be more accurately and precisely defined by the experimenter. The counseling Center of San Antonio College has a fairly well-defined and clear-cut process for placing students in Basic English. Consequently the Basic English factor provided more solid data for the statistical analysis.

The data collected concerning the experimental essay grade and the composition course grade were also well defined. In both these cases, the investigator set the standard. This, of course, does not say that this standard was the best or most accurate measure of student performance, but it is a single standard which was applied uniformily on all subjects involved in the research.

Educational Implications of the Study

Teaching

What this investigation means for the teaching of composition lies mainly in the realization, after examining the findings of the study, that content per se, the ideas, opinions,

viewpoints, and feelings that students express in their essays, deserve a great deal of emphasis in a composition course. In essence, what a student writes should receive as much attention as how he writes.

This what goes even beyond the usual consideration given by most teachers of composition to such rhetorical matters as: logical reasoning, organization, support of argument, consideration of audience, making transitions, all of which are necessary and important. These factors, however, still do not encompass all that composition study demands.

The findings of this study indicate that the subjects involved were not firm or resolute toward the ideas they wrote in their school-related essays. Because of this, it is suggested that more composition instruction be devoted to helping students define their ideas clearly, to consider the implication of their views and the arguments for and against them. In essence students need to understand that they can write better papers, and they can be more convincing in what they write if they are themselves solid and steadfast about what they wish to write.

This of course means that composition teachers must allow, indeed stress, independent and creative thinking on the part of their students. Of course few if any composition teachers would admit they do not already encourage freedom of thought in the classroom. The problem is converting this generally accepted and popular aim into practice.

During the interviews conducted in the second part of the study, it was readily apparent to the investigator that in practically every case, the ideas that students expressed orally were more clear and convincing than the same ideas they expressed in the written essay. This, or course, is what Zoellner repeatedly found in the interviews he conducted while developing the Talk-Write metaphor. If it is true, that students express themselves best in oral discourse, then teachers of composition should encourage more oral discourse in the classroom, particualrly as a pre-writing activity. In view of the findings of this research, it is recommended that oral and written discourse be united more closely in the teaching of writing in English composition classes.

To do this, it is suggested that students be required to explain the ideas they want to include in their essays orally before they write. This can be done with another student in the class, it can be done as a group activity with each student explaining to the class what he plans to write, it can be done on a one-to-one basis with the teacher, or students can make use of tape recorders. A play back of previously recorded monologues would make students more conscious of audience.

Unlike the oral discourse of this study, where the student was not aware that he was being asked to re-express his ideas, the oral discourse that is here being suggested demands close coordination of the two activities. Students should understand they are talking about the same subject they are planning to

write on for a very specific reason, to solidify and settle on the exact views they want to include in their essays.

It is further recommended that as a student procedes with his oral discourse, he also be questioned by his audience. If he is cross-examined in this fashion, he will have to defend his arguments. Such activity should uncover weak points and additionally make the student aware of more aspects of his subject.